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ABSTRACT

Many classics in children's literature have metaphoric structures that enhance the structure of the plot. Metaphor is not an added frill to creative writing, nor is it the private province of poets. It is a necessary part of everyday language. One viewpoint on metaphor can be found in studies on child language acquisition. Children do use expressions that are metaphoric in structure, but which are either merely overextensions of concepts by a child who is still in the very early stages of concept development, or they come from the child's world of "let's pretend." A second way to look at metaphor is from an anthropological viewpoint. If an anthropologist wishes to understand a culture, his or her task is to understand the metaphors used by that culture. A third aspect of research on metaphors is related to linguistics and semantic language questions. Metaphors come from a deliberate choice of terms and from a clear, well-defined understanding of the diverse domains that are brought together in a specific metaphor. The role of teachers in teaching metaphor includes increasing their own understanding of metaphor, developing students' vocabulary, and enriching their factual knowledge and world experience. Journal writing and a rich program of literature and poetry will also help children explore language. Once children have been immersed in a rich language background so that they feel free to write and have had guided experiences with poetry, they can then be encouraged to experiment with the construction of metaphor. (HTH)

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Metaphor in the Lives of Children

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Metaphor in the Lives of Children

At previous New York State English Council Conferences I have spoken about metaphor under various aspects. Initially I became interested in metaphor through work in literature with gifted children. For the gifted child who devours books at an enormous rate, the systematic study of at least some books on a higher level of thought processing can be rewarding to both child and teacher. One example I used was the book The Summer of the Swans (Byars, 1970). This is a story which is very interesting to read on a literal level. However, it can also be interpreted on a metaphoric level as well. It uses the metaphor of swans throughout the entire story to explain one character, a mute retarded boy. The common ground for the metaphor is the muteness of the boy and the swans. This novel and many other classics in children's literature have metaphoric structures which enhance the structure of the plot.

Next I looked at metaphor's role in everyday life. Contrary to what many think, metaphor is not an added frill to creative writing nor is it the private province of poets. It is a part and a necessary part of everday language. Some expressions are what researchers call "frozen" metaphors. In the origins of their use they were original and fresh but have now become so much a part of our language we almost take them to be literal until we look at them more closely. Some commonplace expressions we use continually are really metaphoric in origin. The expression "leg of a chair" is not at all unusual to us. Yet it is a metaphor since chairs do not have legs in the sense that you , or I, or animals do. Some two and one half year old children when asked to point to the leg of the chair point to their own legs. They are not yet ready to use leg in a metaphorical sense.

However, by age three and one half all children unerringly point to the chair leg when questioned. They understand the metaphors of everyday life but are not quite ready to create new ones. Truly creative metaphors are seldom found in the oral language of elementary school children. However, use of true metaphors begins to emerge in the teen-age years. Teenage slang includes metaphors and many are quite colorful, "He was up in his hat with delight." or dialing a radio is "changing the tunes."

In using metaphors we borrow from life's experiences. From the days of railroads we use "side-tracked" as a metaphor. From highways we use "by-pass"; airplane travel gives us "tailspin." There are men's metaphors- "a bubble off level" and women's ones, "nutty as a fruitcake."

Serious writers use metaphor in order to explain a theory or to explicate their thoughts on a subject. White (1966) in Lives in Progress sets up a metaphor of "plants" to explain parents' roles in rearing their children. He points out that raising plants is one of mankind's most successful activities. The husbandsman does not try to thrust impossible patterns on his plants. He lets plants do the growing. He does not poke at the seed to make it grow quickly. The nurturing of growth requires the patience of the gardener rather than the hasty intervention of the mechanic.

During the past year I have examined the research literature on metaphor from three distinct viewpoints. One viewpoint on metaphor is found in studies on child language acquisition. In this area the research findings are tenuous and often conflicting. Children from ages 2½ until after 4 have been studied in natural language settings for their use of metaphor. Personally I have found that children do use expressions which are metaphoric in structure. For example, one child with untied shoelaces said, "My shoes are leaking

all over the floor." Another child, one hot and muggy morning, said "I woke up all fire and water." Authors who have taped the language of very young children find numerous examples such as these. However, these expressions begin to disappear as the child approaches school age. There is no doubt that these expressions fulfill some aspects of the definition of metaphor. However, I am inclined to believe the children are not using true metaphors. These expressions are either merely overextensions of concepts by a child who is still in the very early stages of concept development or they come from the world of pretend which is one way in which children try out actions and semantic matching in as if situations.

In looking at the journal writing of elementary school children I have found few metaphors used. However, these same years where few metaphors are used by children, tne research literature indicates a developmental growth in their comprehension of metaphors and in their ability to distinguish metaphors from literal expressions or anomalous ones. Vosniadou and Ortony (1982), after studying the comprehension of metaphors by young children, speculate that initially at about age 4 children distinguish between literal and nonliteral similarities. Then as their world knowledge grows they comprehend and then produce comparisons which are non-literal. They rely on properties of concepts which are more abstract and relational rather than on the descriptive concrete properties found earlier.

A second way to look at metaphor is from an anthropological viewpoint. If an anthropologist wishes to understand a culture his or her task is to understand the metaphors used. These nuances of language express understandings and relations directly related to the culture. It is only when we understand the metaphors used that we really understand

the people.

The third aspect of research on metaphor and perhaps the one closest to the hearts of English teachers, is that research related to linguistics and semantic language questios. Levin's (1977) book The Semantics of Metaphor updates the work of earlier researchers and sets forth his theory of metaphor. He explains metaphor through a semantics features approach. A look at his approach in some depth will help us lay the framework for a teaching approach to be discussed later. He is concerned with meaning in sentences and what we must do when a sentence is a deviant expression. One of his examples is similar to one of my sentences earlier in this paper. He gives the example "My brother devoured three books this morning." Levin explains how we understand this sentence. He uses the theory of semantic features to explain how we construe meaning. The sentence originally would have been deviant since book does not contain the semantic feature [+ FOOD] normally required by the concept devour. Originally the reader or listener might have construed the meaning by deleting or neutralizing the feature [+ FOOD], leaving as semantic features in the concept devour [+ RAPID, + INTENSIVE], features which are compatible with book. Through continued use of devour in this and similar contexts, the metaphorical meaning of devour is accepted and eventually becomes a sub-reading in the dictionary entry for the word (p.31). The result is that this sentence is more colorful, more vivid and more striking than a more literal one might have been. Levin further elaborates his semantic feature theory of metaphor and I can only conclude from his work that metaphors come from a deliberate choice of terms and from a clear, well defined understanding of the diverse domains which are brought together in the specific metaphor. This conclusion supports statements made by Piaget throughout his works that

young children do not use true metaphor until they can perform formal operations. Children cannot make that deliberate choice of joining certain semantic features of one concept with a diverse concept to construe a unique meaning which is metaphor.

Realizing the pervasiveness and complexity of the concept of metaphor and the sometimes contradictory nature of the research literature we now ask ourselves what can be the role of the classroom teacher in teaching about metaphor. I feel the first task is the teacher's own. He or she must develop an awareness and understanding of all the ramifications of metaphor. Many elementary school teachers know little about the role of metaphor in language. They see it only in its most restrictive sense as an ornament to poetry. Few elementary texts teach the meanings of metaphors. Even when they do it is merely to practice metaphors in conjunction with similes as figures of speech. Once teachers understand metaphor they will be better able to use it as a pedagogical tool.

If we are to enrich children's comprehension and use of language, it seems to me that the best way in the elementary school is through vocabulary development. In semantic mapping children analyze the attributes and features which distinguish one concept from another. A knowledge of the connotative and denotative meanings of words seems to be the best preparation for encouraging lively, creative metaphors.

Another way to prepare for the development of metaphors is through accumulating factual knowledge. New research into the "world knowledge" that children have for common concepts points out how that knowledge is categorized and organized semantically and seems to indicate that it not only affects but also enhances comprehension. If a child were to come across a description of a character in a story that read

"He was a jellyfish in every way." could the child interpret the meaning? The child can provided that he or she knows the characteristics and features of that group of marine animals.

Journal writing done daily is another foundation for the development of metaphor. This seems to be a good way for a child to explore language use. In the upper grades of the elementary school and in junior high the teacher who reads these journals will be able to spot the beginnings of a personal metaphor.

A rich classroom program in literature is also a fruitful way to encourage a focus on language use. There are numerous examples of metaphor on the word or sentence level to be found in children's books. One beautiful example is Natalia Belting's The Sun is a Golden Earring which uses the metaphors found in other cultures. A discussion of some of these examples is sure to stimulate children to thought and expression.

> The twilight clouds are the clothes of the goddesses hung out to air. India
>
> The sky is a tent roof. Stars are holes in it that the winds blow through. Siberia

Poetry is a rich source of metaphors and is the source which teachers have traditionally used. Poetic metaphors are creative, fresh, and compress meanings. A unit on metaphor in children's poetry can be developed using Bloom's taxonomy as a framework. * In the taxonomy the simplest level represents the process of acquiring and remembering information. A learning experience at the Knowledge Level might be the reading of the poem "Fog". Children would be encouraged to tell which words the author uses to give the feeling of fog. At the Comprehension Level where children

* All poems referred to are to be found in Larrick (1965).

are asked to reorganize knowledge an activity might be to write a description of a cloud and then read Christina Rosetti's poem "Clouds" and then contrast their own language with that found in the poem. At the Application Level the children can listen to recorded sounds of wind, or rain, or the ocean and then try to describe these sounds in words, or find a poem which does. On the Analytical Level the imagery and poetic language of metaphor can be studied through looking at the way two poets express different types of imagery on the same theme. For example, Rachel Field's "City Lights" can be compared to Langston Hughes' poem "City". At the Synthesis Level children can be encouraged to look at a familiar image and see how the metaphors of a poem can help us see the image in a new way. The poem "Windy Wash Day" by Dorothy Aldis is a delightful example of a familiar image of a clothesline described anew in bouncy metaphors. Finally at Bloom's highest level that of Evaluation, children can read two poems with contrasting images and evaluate the personal metaphors used. "Snowflakes" by Marchette Chute and "Snow in the City" by Rachel Field are two examples with contrasting images and metaphors.

After children have been immersed in a rich language background so that they feel free to write and have had guided experiences with poetry then, and only then, would I begin to teach and to encourage experimentation with the direct construction of metaphors. From such a rich learning environment young children can and do produce metaphors. Two examples from primary grade children who had studied the concept "big" and whose teacher had encouraged creative thinking came up with the following responses to the prompt "If I were a giant . . ". "...I would use the sun to light my cigarette." and ". . .I could use the stars to play jacks." They prove that Metaphor is important in the Lives of Children.

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